The World According to Rich

kidbrothers.net/release/sum92art.html

Roberta Croteau

The word enigmatic rarely escapes any written description of Reunion Records artist and songwriter, Rich Mullins. For the past decade he has continued to live up to that moniker with 6 albums that have added a unique new color to the landscape of Christian music. His music is rich with diversity, blending non-pop standard instruments like bagpipes and dulcimers with strong quartets and electric guitars. The sounds are matched with evocative lyrics that often contrast the simplicity of his music, earning him accolades as one of today's most talented songwriters. His newest album, The World As Best As I Remember It, Volume 2 continues the mystery and the wisdom of this poet musician...

He thinks he's a jerk. His friends think he's a genius. Reviewers call him enigmatic, while his record company bills him as "a poet for the common man." His manager describes him as one of the few people she actually sees Christ living through. And if you're someone without access to your feelings, his producer believes Rich Mullins would likely strike you as "an irrelevant egghead." Christian music fans, it seems, just enjoy an artist who can state the truth simply enough that it becomes profound... or profoundly enough that it all becomes very simple.

If you get the chance to listen to Rich Mullins speak, you begin to understand what all the fuss is about. What he has to say and how he chooses to say it is nothing, if not memorable, and you'll likely walk away from the experience thinking about a whole lot more than just music. His elfin grin belies the philosopher inside and a child-like wonder of the world he lives in finds good company with a healthy dose of honest cynicism toward status quo Christianity.

"Most people in the industry don't take me very seriously. I think they think I'm cute and I really think I'm dangerous. Sometimes some of the things I say, I know, are positively, absolutely despised by evangelicals."

His song, "Jacob and 2 Women" from Volume 1 was a good example.

"Everyone always wants to know what I meant... I don't believe that Christianity is a moral religion. I don't think that it's essentially about morals. I don't buy most of the prohibitions that the church puts on people. I utterly accept the prohibitions that the Scriptures put on us... I'm not a libertine. It's just a song that says some of that."

Producer Reed Arvin (who has worked on all 6 Mullins' projects) has trouble even talking about his friend's writing, and it's not because of its sometimes provocative nature. "I can't think about his writing without being emotional, or getting wiped out," he says. "It's like literature. You read a story and you're not sure what it's about, but it makes you have the feeling more than someone telling you what it's about. And Rich doesn't actually tell you what it's about sometimes. And you don't know why, but you can't stop crying. What is that? Nobody knows." Arvin continues, "I put Rich in an unparalleled category as a lyricist in Christian music. To me, there's Rich and then there's everyone else. The only reason that he didn't get Steven Curtis Chapman's voice is because God said, 'Well, that's just too much. That's not going to be, 'cause you'd be insufferable.'"

Boy Like Rich

They say we are all the product of our heritage, our own history and the choices we make along the way...and if you've heard Rich's popular song from Volume 1, "Boy Like Me/Man Like You," you got a brief peek at some of the memories that shaped his growing up years. The Indiana born son says his childhood was like a "Norman Rockwell painting...with a few minotaurs from Picasso strategically placed around."

The Rockwell influence is seen in his snapshot memories of family and growing up, like the time his great grandmother tried to explain just how old the trees in the front yard were. "She said they were old enough that when Abraham Lincoln lived in Indiana, he may have walked under those trees. So I went out and saluted. For a long time I just sat under the tree with my hand over my head, thinking Abraham Lincoln stood here."

Or the time his grandfather took Rich to the Courthouse where he worked: "I remember whispering because it looked so holy to me with the big vaulted ceilings and I thought, wow, this is what law and order come out of. There's a granite Ten Commandments on the lawn of the Courthouse and I thought that it was the actual original Ten Commandments, which I thought

was very funny that they would end up in Richmond, Indiana."

And then there was his older cousin Jim, whose hand-me-downs Rich could hardly bear to wait for. "He was a big hero of mine. I wanted to be like him so bad I could taste it. I couldn't wait to be big enough to wear his clothes and if they had holes in them I liked it even better because he had worn them down and I thought maybe some of the virtue would rub off on me."

But the idyllic memories were tempered with the traditional 'growing pain demons,' and for Rich a lot of that came from dad and son not seeing much eye to eye.

"My father was Appalachian... which is a nice way of saying hillbilly. ***His*** *father was a coal miner, and his father died of alcohol poisoning. His father died in the Federal Pen for counterfeiting. So I had this terrific heritage to follow in..."*

Growing up in the late sixties and seventies, most of the 'missed eye-contact' was expectedly political, at a time when a lot of values were being questioned: "He responded by being very dogmatic. My cousins are questioning the Vietnam War and my father furiously and blindly defends the U.S. involvement without knowing why. And he didn't know how to defend the answers, so he decided to attack the questions. And I highly resented that. I remember, in high school we had these mock elections and because my family was Democratic, I decided to campaign for the Republicans...just 'cause I was a stinker all along."

As Rich recalls it, the quickly deteriorating relationship with his father was quickly matched and probably ignited by his growing mistrust of a lot of the 'sacred institutions' that were beginning to fall around him.

"I remember a particular rape case that was dismissed, that there was really no question about. And it was a little legal battle, but it had nothing to do with the fact that a woman was really raped. What it really had to do with was that the police had failed to go through some technicality. Not to say that law isn't important, but all of a sudden all these things were happening and I was going... I thought this was about justice, but it's not. Maybe the Vietnam War really isn't about democracy. Maybe it's about something else. And of course, then Ford pardoned Nixon, which was a very powerful moment for me, because what that said to me very clearly

was that the government of my country was no longer responsible to the people.

"So my dad was defending all this that I was beginning to question and he was very threatened by the fact that I was questioning things. My junior year in high school I realized that of the Ten Commandments, the one that bothered me the most was 'honor your mother and father.' And I was going, 'That can't be right. This is one big mistake in the Bible.' And I began to really pray about that. I kind of came to realize, even though I couldn't articulate it at the time, that boy, until you come to terms with your heritage, you will never be at peace with yourself. Now I realize that if I cannot honor my father I will never honor anybody. So I began to really pray about it and I think there was really a bit of a miracle."

The 'miracle' began on a trip to Kentucky (his father's home) where the Mullins family gathered for an aunt's funeral. "The graveyard was full of the Mullins family and my dad started walking me to tombstone after tombstone and telling me the stories of how they all died. He told me how many children they had and how many children died in infancy, with the little stones that had no names on them. And all of a sudden I began to realize that his life had not been like mine. And that same weekend, you know how at funerals people reminisce... they started talking bout the past and all of a sudden I saw my dad for the first time, not as a symbol of authority that I resented, but as a little boy. They talked about the little boy that had gone tot he top of Black Mountain and taken the chain off his bicycle and coasted down just to see how far he could go before he wrecked. And a young boy and his friends who found weeds on the mountain that they would collect, dry out, smoke and get high from. And they of course were all laughing about this. It's an interesting thing to do with kids in the room 'cause we all went 'YOU DID THAT?!' And I thought, man, he went through everything that every kid goes through. And I believe now, that in the literal sense of the word, God miraculously helped me to see my dad as a person, and not as a symbol. And I think, in terms of my growing up, that was a very big moment for me. I think that has shaped a good bit of my life ever since then."

Learning to Grow Young

The World As Best As I Remember It, Volume 1,

explored faith of the past, with songs retelling the stories of Jacob, Rachel, Daniel, and Esther, as seen through Rich's eyes. Volume 2 hits a little closer to home, as Mullins reminisces on his own struggles with faith through his friends ("What Susan Said"), his family ("Growing Young"), and the church ("To Tell Them"). And more and more each day he admits to learning "even I can be changed."

"I think we all come to see each other symbolically rather than as we really are. And one of the big goals that I have that I fall short of frequently is to see people not as vehicles. And when I don't like someone, I have to say, 'You know what? There is probably a time when that person had a first date and got a nose bleed from being nervous. And maybe he's had the same experiences that I've had. And maybe he's not grumpy, he's just lonely.' We can't see each other very clearly, but I'm learning. I've realized that I was willing to be obedient to God as long as his commands made sense to me. But I wasn't willing to be obedient to God when they stopped making sense. Whenever you decide that logic is more binding than devotion, you miss the mark. It's like there are some people that when you go into their house you should take your shoes off, not because it's absolutely morally right, but because that is what they want. And there are other people who you go into their house and you should not take your shoes off. Not because of any moral absolutes, but just because that's their preference. And at some point I began to say to

myself, what if, instead of thinking in terms of moral absolutes, what if I just think for a while in terms of, maybe God just has preferences that I don't understand but they're God's preferences. And if I love my friends there are things that I do because I love to be with them. Why can't I love God that much? Why can't I love God enough to say, 'if this offends you, then I don't want to do it.' But I guess you grow little by little and you see more and more how little you see. One of the things that I'm finally coming around to is that as much as I wish I was St. Francis, as much as I wish I was a Mother Theresa, as much as I would aspire to empty myself, there's an awful lot of me left in here."

His friend Beaker might not agree. If it's true that the best way to lose a friend is to live with them, time's not up yet for Rich and his sir-name-less cohort/writing partner and fellow musician roommate. The two have formed their own tongue-in-cheek monastic order, 'Kid Brothers Of Saint Frank,' and work together out of their home base in Wichita, Kansas. Rich says friends are a painful blessing. "Friendship has a lot to do with enduring people while they go through their weird times. Beaker is a very close friend, who in the period of time we've known each other, has definitely exposed in me everything that I hate about myself. He has drawn out of me all kinds of things that I would love to have the illusion didn't exist."

Stumbling Heavenward

*Writer Fredrick Buechner talks about the difference between something being a canvas, where, presumably, everything is right in front for you to view, and something being a transparency, where it is less what we see **in** it than what we see **through** it that matters. Rich Mullins colors a canvas with his music, but he himself remains a transparency. His honest revelations of the struggles in his own life have brought those who listen that much nearer the truth of the One who lives through him.*

Mullins often likes to quote Robert Frost, who described a good poem as 'an immortal wound' - something that strikes you so hard, you never get over it. As a writer, Rich has left some of those scars on Christian music fans who've had 'ears to hear,' and Rich's World, as best as he can remember it, is a stunning reminder of the joy in the journey. And so he remains, like Abraham, a fellow sojourner on the road to righteousness, who discovered faith even in his darkness... and found that sometimes, even the night was beautiful.

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